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Dialog kultur, dziedzictwo antyku

Tradycja i współczesność

BYZANTIUM and RENAISSANCES

Dialogue of Cultures, Heritage of Antiquity

Tradition and Modernity

pod redakcją

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oraz Zuzanny Flisowskiej, Karoliny Mroziewicz, Niny i Krzysztofa Smólskich

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Arabo-Byzantine Traffic of Manuscripts

and the Connection between the Greco-Arabic Translation Movement and the First Byzantine 'Renaissance' (9th–10th Centuries)

Among the manuscripts from the middle-Byzantine period we posses a collection of fifteen manuscripts that form a genuine neoplatonic library – with works of Plato, his commentators such as Proclus and Damascius, Christian neoplatonists such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and various treatises on geography and other subjects. According to the opinion of Bernard Flusin, this philosophical collection, which displays an exceptional interest in philosophy, was produced in the middle of the ninth century, without a doubt by a single scriptorium and quite possibly it was also requested by a single person. Scholars have searched, in vain, to attribute it to the activity of Leon the Grammarian or Photius.[1] This paper will entertain an entirely different perspective regarding the question of who could have ordered these manuscripts in Byzantium – an Arab.

Arabo-Byzantine connection

The Muslim civilisation that emerged in the seventh century was highly affected by the culture of its Byzantine and Sassanid predecessors. We can observe many Byzantine influences in the nascent caliphate. In very few cases they were direct (as in art), but this was not necessarily always the case. Almost everything that Arabs were doing on a larger scale – building monumental architecture, searching for identity, waging wars, even defining religion – was done in defiance of the splendour of the still mighty and impressive

1 B. Flusin, 'La production byzantine des livres aux siècles VII–VIII', in *Le monde byzantin: t. 2, L'Empire byzantin 641–1204*, Paris 2006, pp. 346–347; L. Perria, 'Scrittura e ornamentazione nei codici della «Collezione filosofica»', *Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici*, 28, 1991, passim; A. Palau, 'Un nuovo codice della «Collezione filosofica», il palimsesto Parisinus graecus 2575', Scriptorium, 55, 2001, pp. 249–274; G. Cavallo, 'Qualche riflessione sulla "collezione filosofica"', in: C. d'Ancona (éd.), *The Libraries of the Neoplatonists*, "Philosophia Antiqua" 107, Leiden 2007, pp. 155–165; F. Ronconi, 'La collection brisée. Pour une étude des milieux socioculturels liés à la «collection philosophique»', in press: *La face cachée de la littérature byzantine. Le texte en tant que message immédiat. Actes du colloque international*, Paris, 5–7 juin 2008.

empire of Constantinople. As a result we can read plentiful articles and books about the presence of Byzantium in Medieval Muslim culture.[2] By contrast, Arabic influences on Byzantium are occasional and difficult to track. They include: the transfer of motifs in art and literature, the dubious idea that iconoclasm was inspired by Islam, as well as influences in astrology and occult sciences, studied recently by Paul Magdalino[3] and Maria Mavroudi[4].

However the most fascinating phenomenon of this period is the simultaneous and somewhat sudden appearance of three movements in different corners of the Mediterranean (Carolingian Empire, Byzantium and Muslim caliphate) that share a common characteristic: an unprecedented interest in ancient culture. This paper will deal with the literary aspect of the "Macedonian" cultural revival (more precisely with the renewal of written production in the ninth century, related to the invention of the extremely efficient minuscule script) and with the Abbasid Greco–Arabic translation movement of IX and X centuries, during which a major part of scientific literature and Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic, including Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, Ptolemy and Galen. This activity, concentrated in Baghdad, was generously sponsored by the caliphs and politico-cultural elite and lead to Greek thought being incorporated into the Islamic tradition.

These two escalations of literary interest in ancient Greek culture, in Byzantium and in the Abbasid caliphate, took place almost simultaneously. The question that appears immediately is whether these movements were related to each other in any way. The long-established answer to this question was negative. In the past, all influence of the Arab world upon Byzantium has been largely denied, especially by the scholars of Byzantium, who called it "just a remarkable coincidence"[5]. A few years ago, this approach was questioned by Dimitri Gutas, a specialist in the Greco-Arabic translation movement. He found it hard to believe that these two movements, which occurred almost simultaneously and which where in many ways so similar, could have been completely unrelated. He maintained that the Byzantines were well aware of philosophical and scientific movements in Baghdad; indeed, they were even under Arabic influence[6].

Gutas makes a very interesting comparison between the books that were being copied or translated in the ninth century in Byzantium on one hand and in the Abbasid caliphate

2 Principal works on the subject containing the current state of research: M. Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani. La Grecia e Roma nella storiografia arabo-islamica medievale*, Pisa 2009; N. M. El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, Cambridge MA 2004.

3 P. Magdalino, 'The Road to Baghdad in the thought-world of ninth-century Byzantium', in *Byzantium in the ninth century: Dead or Alive? Papers from the Thirtieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996*, ed. Leslie Brubaker, Aldershot 1998, p. 195–213; P. Magdalino, *L'orthodoxie des astrologues: la science entre le dogme de la divination à Byzance (VIIe-XIIe siècles)*, Paris 2006.

4 M. Mavroudi, *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation: The Oneirocriticon of Achmet and Its Arabic Sources*, Leiden 2002.

5 P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin. Notes et remarques sur enseignement et culture à Byzance des origines au Xe siècle*, Paris 1971, p. 30 and chapter 'L'hypothèse du relais syro-arabe', passim (pp. 22–42).

6 D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsid Society (2nd–4th / 8th–10th centuries)*, London – New York 1998, chapter «The Legacy Abroad: The Translation Movement and the «First Byzantine Humanism» of the Ninth Century», p. 175–186.

on the other. He sets side by side the list of works translated into Arabic at that time and the list of the very first manuscripts that have undergone the process of transcription into minuscule in Byzantine scriptoria[7]. The correlation between them is striking.

Gutas gives two possible explanations for these similarities.[8] Firstly, the Greek manuscripts could have been copied in the ninth and tenth centuries through imitation or as a response to the Arabic translation of these very works. This would represent a kind of emulation or rivalry at the cultural level. The Byzantines, being aware of Arab achievements in the fields of science and philosophy, would have wanted to prove their superiority. This rivalry was a constant element in the diplomatic game of that time. The Byzantine determination to reclaim cultural superiority over the Arabs would have provoked their desire to emulate Muslim achievements and nourished a renewed interest in Greek heritage.

Secondly, the manuscripts could have been copied in Byzantium because of a specific Arabic demand for these works. The Arabs were highly interested in Greek philosophical and scientific literature. They needed the manuscripts. In fact, as we will see, the caliphs seized every opportunity to obtain them from Byzantium. The Byzantines possibly became aware of this matter and according to Gutas they may have provided the Arabs with fresh copies of the Greek manuscripts that were in their possession. This paper will leave out the theory of cultural rivalry and instead will focus on the manuscripts.

The Arabic demand

The Arabic demand for Greek manuscripts would be difficult to underestimate. On several occasions, sources inform us of great efforts undertaken by caliphs in order obtain Greek manuscripts from Byzantium. Frequently they were taken as booty after conquest of a Byzantine city. According to Ibn Gulgul, Caliph al-Muʿtaim, after the conquest of the major Byzantine city of Amorium, ordered to take the remains of the books stored in the local library and then called the famous physician Yuhannā ibn Māsawayh to translate them.[9] It is probable that such events occurred quite often, since the Muslim jurists of that period paid special attention to the question of what to do with foreign books acquired as booty in wartime.[10] The caliphs also employed more peaceful means to obtain books. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Maʾmūn wrote to the Byzantine emperor asking him for a selection of old scientific manuscripts from Byzantium (فكتب الى ملك الروم يسأله ارسال نسخ من ما عندكم من العلوم القديمة المخزونة المدخرة ببلد الروم). The letter was followed by a group of scholars sent by the caliph with an order to bring and translate these books[11].

7 Ibidem, pp. 180–184.

8 Ibidem, pp. 184–185.

9 Ibn Gulgul, *Tabaqāt al-atibbā' wa l-hukamā'*, ed. F. Sayyid, Cairo 1955, p. 65; D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture...*, p. 123 and p. 178;

10 Balty-Guesdon compares the opinions of two jurists, Awzāʿī and al-Šāfʿī, on this subject; M.-G. Balty-Guesdon, 'Le Bayt al-hikma de Baghdad', *Arabica*, 39, 1992, p. 134.

11 Ibn al-Nadim, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. A. F. Sayyid, London, 2009, p. 142. Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al--Nadīm: a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, tr. B. Dodge, New York 1970, p. 584.

It was not only the caliphs who were interested in books from Byzantium. The same Ibn al-Nadīm tells us what he heard from Ibn Šahrām[12], a tenth century envoy to Constantinople. He came back to Baghdad with reports about the abundance of books in Byzantium. He recounted during a general gathering (فى مجلس عام), presumably of scholars, that he had seen in Byzantium a building of ancient construction (عانبلا مىدق لكيه), closed since the adoption of Christianity by the Romans, in which there were among other dazzling riches numerous camel-loads of ancient books. We should draw particular attention to a few important points:

- the fact that ibn Šahrām announces this information to a gathering of the scholars of Baghdad;
- the mercantile language he uses (especially the phrase "numerous camel-loads of ancient books" – نم الكتب القديمة ام على لحمل عدّة أحمال),
- Ibn al-Nadīm's belief that Ibn Šahrām had: 'exaggerated to the extent of a thousand camel [loads]';
- the attention Ibn Šahrām pays to describing the quality of the manuscripts ("some of these [books] were worn and some in normal condition. Others were eaten by insects.")
- and finally the fact that he emphasises the close contacts he had with the Byzantine emperor, who gave him access to these books.

All these elements to the story make me think of a commercial advertisement, as if Ibn Šahrām was trying to attract interest in these great quantities of manuscripts, lying unused in Byzantium and longing to be taken to the caliphate.

Byzantium therefore was famous in the Arabic world for possessing numerous Greek works. Moreover, this reputation was common not only in the Abbasid Caliphate, but in Umayyad Spain and in Fatimid Egypt as well. Some sources speak of Arabs who came to Byzantium precisely with the specific aim of buying Greek books. Ibn al-Nadīm gives few names of some important scholars and political figures "who were concerned with the bringing of books from the Byzantine country" (نم نمم نع يني إب جارخإ الكتب نم مورالا دلب) and goes on to say that they sent "Hunayn ibn Ishāq and others to the Byzantine country to bring them rare books and unusual compositions about philosophy, geometry, music, arithmetic, and medicine" (دلب الى هريغو قاحسإ نب نيني حنص اوذفنا ى قيسيومل او ةسدنه ل او ةفسلفل ي فيفي تافنصمل ا بئارغو بتكل ا فئارطب مهؤاجف مورل ا ب طل او ى قيطام ثرال او).[13] There are more stories of that kind, even dating to later periods, for example of Muhammad b. Sa'id, a thirteenth century historian and librarian from Malaga, who was an avid buyer of Byzantine books. When he heard of a famine in Byzantium, he sent a shipment of grain to Constantinople, but commanded his agent not to give it to the starving Byzantines unless in exchange for – nothing else than – books.[14]

12 *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, p. 144, tr. B. Dodge, p. 585.

13 *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, p. 142; *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, tr. B. Dodge, p. 584; G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West with Special Reference to Scholasticism*, Edinburgh 1990, pp. 73–75; Ibn al-'Imād al-Hanbalī, *Šadarāt al-dahab fī ahbār man dahab*, III, Cairo 1931, pp. 259–60; Ibn Abī Usaibi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā' fī tabaqāt al-atibbā*, ed. N. Ridā, Beirut 1965, pp. 651–659, esp. 655–656.

14 G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism*..., p. 75; Ibn Abī Usaibi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā' fī tabaqāt al-atibbā*, ed. N. Ridā, Beirut 1965, pp. 651–659, esp. 655–656.

We can imagine therefore, that Arabic scholars were very interested in importing Greek manuscripts from Byzantium. However, there was one extremely significant problem: money.

The Financial aspect

It is easy to envisage a number of difficult predicaments related to this kind of activity. Getting into contact with Byzantine copyists, buying old precious manuscripts or commanding new ones to be copied and importing them to Baghdad... It would be quite a costly affair. Did the scholars of Baghdad have that amount of money? In fact they did. Firstly, we must understand the importance of the book trade in the Arab world, which prospered much better than that in Byzantium.[15] It was so important that, for example, in Baghdad, there was a whole neighbourhood of bookstores and many people made their living through the production and trade of books. For instance – Ibn al-Nadīm himself, the historian who is mentioned in this paper so frequently, inherited from his father a bookstore coupled with a publishing company and his opus – *Al-Fihrist'* – was intended as a complete catalogue of the books and authors that he possessed in his facilities (or that he knew of).

Simply speaking – there was huge amount of money involved in the book business in Baghdad, especially in the Greco-Arabic translation movement. This process was very fortunate when it came to finding patrons. Most of the groups belonging to the elite of Baghdad – regardless of their position and of religious or ethnic affiliation – were interested in sponsoring translations.[16] This movement was initiated by the Abbasid caliphs themselves.[17] Subsequently, it was developed and sponsored by their families, courtiers, state officials[18] and by the emerging community of scholars.[19] As they paid a lot for these works, their expectations grew. The more profitable the translation movement became, the more professional it turned out to be.

This is the case for the instance of Hunayn ibn Ishāq (809–873), a Nestorian physician and the most famous of the translators. Ibn Abī Usayb'ia, a thirteenth century biographer of physicians, relates a story about the beginning of his career which sheds some light on the level of professionalism expected from the translators by their generous patrons.[20] On his first visit to Baghdad, Hunayn ibn Ishāq is admitted as a student by Yūhannā ibn Māsawayh (777–857), the famous Abbasid court physician and director of the House of Wisdom. Yuhannā is irritated by Hunayn's lack of proficiency at Greek and throws him out. Hunayn decides to leave Baghdad and to go to Byzantium. There he studies Byzan-

15 H. Touati, *L'armoire à sagesse, Bibliothèques et collections en Islam*, Paris 2006, pp. 205–244 (chapter: 'Marchands, faussaires et experts'); G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism*..., pp. 266–267 (chapter: 'Booksellers-Stationers and the Production of Books).

16 D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*..., p. 135.

17 Ibidem, p. 125.

18 Ibidem, pp. 128–130.

19 Ibidem, pp. 133–134.

20 Ibn Abī Usaibi'a, *Uyūn al-anbā' fī tabaqāt al-atibbā*, ed. A. Müller, Cairo–Königsberg 1884, vol. I, 185 f.; D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*..., p. 138; for bibliography and discussion: G. Strohmaier, 'Homer in Bagdad', *Byzantinoslavica*, 41, 1980, pp. 196–200.

tine literature (مورلا بادآ), reads 'their books' (مهبتك ةءارق) and learns the Greek language (تعلم للسان الينونانيي). When he returns after three years, he possesses a level of Greek so high that he chanted Homer (سيرموأل ةيمورلاب ارعش دشني) and by heart. Then he reconciles with Yuhannā.

This story is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it shows the degree to which a translators' professionalism was pursued. This proficiency was much desired and in consequence it became well-paid. It could have been an incentive for Byzantine copyists to intensify their copying of manuscripts, in order to meet Arabic demand. Secondly, it provides an example of the fact that the Arabs associated the source of education in the Greek language with Byzantium.

When the translations became a very profitable business, their authors were able to devote plenty of resources and effort in order to acquire the manuscripts to work on and the skills required to translate them. However, could Arab demand for Greek books have influenced Byzantine manuscript production? The sources themselves contain no straightforward information regarding this matter, but we can find a few clues here and there: for example in the following story.

Qustā ibn Lūqā[21] (circa 820–circa 912) was a Christian scholar of Greek origin who translated into Arabic multiple Greek works and wrote several books himself on astronomy, mathematics, medicine and philosophy. In his youth, he left his hometown and went to Baghdad in search of fame and fortune as a translator. Ibn al-Nadīm mentions Qustā while describing the mission of a group of Arabic translators that where dispatched by al-Ma'mun to Byzantium to find rare manuscripts. Ibn al-Nadīm thus goes on to say that "Qustā ibn Lūqā [also] brought some material with him, which he translated, it also being translated for him" (وكان قسطا بن لوقا البعلبكي قد حمل معه شيئا فنقله ونقل له).[22] This story would seem to be the perfect embodiment of the theory of a Byzantine answer to the Arabic demand for Greek manuscripts. A young Greek scholar leaves his hometown hoping (correctly) to pursue a career in Baghdad. He even takes some manuscripts with him. However there is a flaw in this version of events: Qustā was not Byzantine. While of Greek language, culture and of Orthodox creed, his hometown was Baalbek, in Syria, a Muslim province for almost three centuries.

A Palestinian intermediary?

It is worthwhile at this point to refer to the fact that Greek manuscripts were probably as numerous inside the caliphate as in Byzantium. The Arabs inherited, with the conquered Byzantine provinces, two focal points of Greek culture – Alexandria and Antioch, as well as many smaller centres. Palestine, or more generally, Syria, was a particularly important area of post-Byzantine learning within the caliphate. The Orthodox environment

21 G. Gabrieli, 'Nota bibliografica su Qosta ibn Luqa', in: Rendiconti della reale Accademia dei Lincei, Serie 5, XXI, Roma, 1912–1913, pages 341–382.

22 *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Sayyid, p. 144, tr. B. Dodge, p. 585.

around Jerusalem not only survived the Muslim conquest, but thanks to its new position within the vast Muslim caliphate, it became very dynamic and innovative,[23] as is proven for instance by the very early implementation of paper or minuscule script.

In this case, perhaps it would be more appropriate to relocate or re-centre the entire model of Arabo-Byzantine manuscript traffic? Maybe we should place this demand-supply scheme within the Caliphate: in Syria and Palestine? We can assume that Arabic translators searched intensively for Greek manuscripts in Palestine, and in Syria in general. Perhaps the concentrated activity of these communities is at least to a certain degree a consequence of the intellectual Golden Era in the Abbasid caliphate? Could it be that Arabs were eager to buy manuscripts from Palestinian monks? Maybe this interest prompted the latter to invent a more efficient way of writing: the famous minuscule? Nevertheless if all of this demand-supply pattern were to be confined to the areas of the Abbasid caliphate, how could we connect it to the development of the Macedonian renaissance in Byzantium?

To better analyse this relationship, we should take into account the close cultural ties between the Greek communities of Palestine and Constantinople in this period. They became very intense due to the arrival of refugees from the Eastern Provinces after the Muslim conquest.[24] Moreover, they magnified during the time of the civil wars and turmoil of the second half of the eighth century and beginning of the ninth.[25] Several important figures of ninth-century Byzantine culture were refugees from Palestine – Theodore and Theophanes Graptoi, George Syncellus, Michel Syncellus and Antony the Younger. For this reason, it would not be a complete novelty if Muslim-ruled Palestine influenced Constantinople culturally.

Among these emigrants was Michel Syncellus (c. 760–846), an educated monk who spent the first part of his life in Palestine.[26] Some time after 810, Michael and his two disciples Theodore and Theophanes, known as the Graptoi, arrived in Constantinople, where they became disciples of Theodore the Studite and they fought together against the heresy of iconoclasm. This cooperation between Palestinian and Studite monk circles is especially interesting for the reason that these two groups are considered as being poten-

23 B. Flusin, 'La production byzantine des livres...', p. 345; C. Mango, 'Greek culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest', in *Scritture, Libri e Testi nelle Aree Provinciali di Bisanzio*, ed. G. Cavallo, G. de Gregorio, M. Maniaci, Spoleto 1988, passim. J. Irigoin, 'Les premiers manuscrits grecs écrits sur papier et le problème du bombycin', *Scriptorium*, 4, 1950, pp. 194–202.

24 M.-F. Auzépy, 'Controversia delle immagini e produzione di testi', in *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo. 3. Le culture circostanti.* vol. I. La *cultura bizantina*, ed. G. Cavallo, Roma 2004, p. 162; C. Mango, 'Greek culture...', p. 160, S. H. Griffith, 'Anthony David of Baghdad, Scribe and Monk of Mar Sabas: Arabic in the Monasteries of Palestine', *Church History*, 58, 1989, No. 1, p. 18.

25 *Theophanes Chronographia*, ed. E. Weber, (=*Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. 43), Bonn 1839, pp. 815–816; cf. S. H. Griffith, 'Greek into Arabic: life and letters in the monasteries of Palestine in the 9th century; the example of the Summa Theologiae Arabica', *Byzantion*, 56, 1986, pp. 117–118.

26 He occupied the prominent post of the syncellus of the patriarch of Jerusalem and simultaneously devoted a lot of time to grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, poetics and astronomy. C. Mango, 'Greek culture...', pp. 153–155; S. H. Griffith, 'What has Constantinople to do with Jerusalem? Palestine in the Ninth Century: Byzantine Orthodoxy in the World of Islam', in *Byzantium in the ninth century: Dead or Alive? Papers from the Thirtieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, march 1996*, ed. Leslie Brubaker, Aldershot 1998, p. 183.

tially responsible for the origin of the minuscule. Indeed, some of the oldest manuscripts written in the new script originate from the Studios. Moreover, we know that from the moment Theodore became abbot of the monastery of Studios, a scriptorium developed there which became an important centre for the copying of Greek manuscripts.[27]

On account of this, is it possible that Greek refugees from the lost Eastern Provinces brought the new script into Byzantium? Or that they had persuaded their hosts in Constantinople of the profits to be derived from copying manuscripts for the Arabs? Although we are not able to answer these questions at this stage, but we cannot exclude them automatically. On top of this the origins of the minuscule are obscure and we cannot yet be sure that they should necessarily be placed in Palestine or in the Studite circles of Constantinople. It is important, nevertheless, to underline the ties that connected those two exceptionally important cultural circles of that period. This relationship may occupy a central place in the further development of the hypothesis presented in this paper.

Conclusion

The model put forward in this paper is not necessarily as complicated or complex as it may seem. While the Greco-Arabic translation movement developed in Baghdad, it was in constant need of Greek texts, and consequently scholars and their patrons started to seek ancient books within the Greek communities of the caliphate or across the border, in Byzantium itself, which was commonly known as the land abounding in Greek manuscripts. These actions were stimulated by an increasing amount of money involved in the Greco-Arabic translation movement. As a result, major incentives appeared for Byzantine copyists or scholars to go to the caliphate, or simply to sell manuscripts to the Arabs. Furthermore, this was rendered more labour-saving by the new invention of a highly efficient minuscule. This process could have taken place directly between the caliphate and Constantinople or, what has been found more plausible, through the intermediary of Palestine.

Nonetheless, this idea poses many difficulties. The main problem is that the sources do not give us direct evidence of the interactions, which would have tied Byzantine (or Palestinian) scriptoria and the translators and scholars from the caliphate. In fact, the sources had simply no interest in describing these processes. Virtually all of the sources that have survived are partisan and engaged in favour of one of the sides of the Arabo-Byzantine cultural rivalry. The authors are very eager to demonstrate the cultural superiority of their own civilisation. As a result there is no chance that they would have described cultural interactions with the enemy, as would be the case for the production or the purchase of manuscripts. We can only hope for accidental, indirect mentions of such processes. Yet besides the lack of explicit information in the sources, the latent evidence, which we have been elaborating upon in this paper, is not unequivocal. Beyond doubt there are several points of this theory that need further analysis.

27 B. Flusin, 'La production byzantine des livres...', pp. 347–348.